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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the work of John Dewey and Earl Kelley for solutions to some of the current problems in United States public schools. After a brief overview of American schools and schooling from colonial times through the 1960s, the essay discusses the work of John Dewey and Earl Kelley. Noting that Dewey's contribution to education is both philosophical and pragmatic, the essay highlights what Dewey tried to achieve in relation to subject matter, teacher role, and the importance of individual perception. As one who continued Dewey's work, Earl Kelley's contribution is seen in connection with his study of perception. Implications of their philosophy for current educational reform efforts suggest that: (1) school subject matter should grow from learners needs and not be imposed by the adults in charge; (2) grades, promotion, and similar devices should be eliminated; and (3) learners should be involved in planning, executing, and evaluating activities. (Contains 11 references.) (MAH)

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John Dewey & Earl Kelley

Giants in Democratic Education

ATE Conference

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by

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The Unfulfilled Mission

by

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A Vision of the Mission – The School for Democracy

> "It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry, for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mostly in need of freedom: without this it goes to rack and ruin without fail."
>
> Albert Einstein

It is not enough to accept that we have problems in our current educational system. This is almost universally acknowledged. What is needed are concrete ideas about what needs to be done. The following examination of the work of John Dewey and Earl Kelley can provide us with the kind of direction for our public schools which is much needed and long overdue.

Education differs from many other human endeavors in that it is a common experience. It was this "common

experience" which Jefferson sought to exploit for the good of democracy by using it to foster democratic ideals. This is the foundation of the track upon which the "education train" runs. The purpose and the intent of the common school was clear. It was, however, never given a proper framework to carry out its mission. A blueprint, if you will, for what such schools should look like was never put in place. This blueprint is even more important in light of the changes in family structure and community organization which have occurred in our society since World War II.

The Constitution of the United States, along with its amendments, provided a plan by which our citizens were able to elect a representative government, enact laws and institute policies to promote those values and ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence, i.e.,

> "...all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Since almost everyone in our nation has been to school, almost everyone believes that they know what is wrong with

our schools. The result has been that every special interest group in our society has presented their platform for school reform. Virtually without exception, their agenda focuses on improving academic achievement. This is, of course, fair game. Schools must address academic achievement. It is absolutely imperative that children be equipped with the necessary tools to function in an increasingly complex society. The problem arises in that academic achievement only addresses one-half of the issue. How we develop a citizenry dedicated to and capable of utilizing and promoting democratic ideals and practices is the other half.

It was clearly intended by the founding fathers that the common school would serve a key role in providing the enlightened citizenry necessary for the success of democracy. The course was set early in our history by such governmental actions as the Land Ordinance Act of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. These acts required that each township reserve a section of land for the purpose of supporting education. The central role which the new nation

believed was served by education is underscored by the following statement from the ordinances:

> "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

Even prior to these landmark ordinances, support for education and the belief that an informed electorate was critical was developing in the emerging nation. The Massachusetts Law of 1647 more commonly known as the "Old Deluder Satan Law" required that:

1) Every town of 50 households appoint and pay a teacher of reading and writing; and
2) Every town of 100 households provide a grammar school to prepare children for the university.

While this law was aimed primarily at providing religious instruction, it became an important landmark in providing publicly-funded educational opportunities in early Colonial America.

As the new nation began to emerge in the 18th century, many of the practices of the colonial schools, which were

patterned after the schools of Europe where classism, sexism, and racism were the norm, began to be challenged. The egalitarian ideas which started to dominate politics influenced education. In 1749, Benjamin Franklin wrote "Proposals Relating to the Youth of Pennsylvania" in which he suggested a new type of secondary school. In 1791, The Franklin Academy was established. The academy was free of religious influence and offered students a wide variety of practical subjects. One important characteristic of the academy was its introduction of electives. Students were able to participate in the planning and implementation of their own educational experience. Such participation is obviously important to the development of democratic attitudes and practices. Schools which fail to provide this opportunity undermine the ability of children to learn about and practice these important principles of democracy.

The Franklin Academy accepted both males and females. This early step towards gender equity was a significant acknowledgement of the equality of opportunity so essential to democratic living. The idea of the academy

grew rapidly, and by the late 1700's, it had replaced the Latin Grammar School as the most important school in America. Within the next century, some 6,000 such schools were established.

The continued evolution of the truly American school was greatly advanced by the First Amendment separation of church and state. Under this provision of the Constitution, schools would be secular in nature and no religion would be allowed to advance its cause through the public schools. A dangerous perversion of this separation is now being attempted by special interest groups in the form of vouchers to support religious schools with public tax money. Where this fails, a thinly disguised but similar effort is taking place in the establishment of so called "charter schools". While not all charter schools are religious in nature, they are almost universally special interest in their orientation and hence, undermine the "common school" experience.

The failure to separate church and state was clearly seen by the framers of the Constitution as a threat to universal religious freedom as well as our emerging

democracy. This principle has served us well for over 200 years. Those who would undermine these principles today through attempts at the public funding of religious and other special interest schools would do well to remember the lessons of history. Our forefathers endured much persecution at the hands of persons whose religious beliefs were different from their own. They were indeed wise to protect each of us from the rest of us.

Although the seeds of a new public education were sown throughout America and the principle of universal educational opportunity was widespread, it was not until the 1830's that Horace Mann, who is often referred to as "the father of the public school", was really able to solidify the movement. It was as a result of his leadership that the schools for the common man really took shape and became commonplace.

This evolution of the common school was long and difficult. It continues today. We as a nation need to reconsider our priorities and actively shape this evolution in the best interests of our survival as a democracy.

Support for universal education was a new phenomena. No such universal education had previously been seen as necessary because an educated citizenry is not required by totalitarian governments. Quite the contrary. Education is the antithesis of tyranny, just as it is the thesis of democracy. It is the act of self-government that requires a citizenry educated, not merely in the narrow sense of academic achievement, but in the broadest possible sense of community morality and self-actualization. This is the missing ingredient in our educational system today. The systematic attempts to undermine the viability of our common schools carries with it the extraordinary risk of also undermining our democracy.

What is needed then to enhance the role of schools in supporting democracy is a blueprint for what such schools would look like. Not a blueprint to achieve some artificially imposed federal standards as some would suggest for it was intended that schools have local control. The blueprint which is needed is one which gives us a model for the school for democracy.

The balance of this chapter is given to such a blueprint. It evolves from the works and the relationship between two great thinkers, John Dewey, primarily a philosopher, and Earl Kelley, primarily an educator. Both during their lifetime spoke and wrote extensively about education for citizenship in a democracy. One is a very famous American, respected and admired throughout the world for his contributions to liberal thought and democratic values as they apply to education. The other is somewhat less known, though certainly no less admired and respected by those who know his work and his contribution.

In an effort to understand what our schools must do and be if they are to fulfill their mission, it is important to examine how their work, which spans seven decades, comes together to provide insight into educating a citizenry to live in and operate a democracy. While their stature as leaders in citizenship education is without question, it is less widely known that a personal relationship existed between them and that a synthesis of their work can provide us with the much needed missing ingredient; a model for the school

which will provide us with generations of citizens skilled in democratic practices and committed to democratic philosophy.

I first met Earl C. Kelley during my junior year as an undergraduate at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. At that time I was seriously considering leaving the teacher education program and the university because I was very disenchanted with both. I strongly felt that the "educational" experience to which I was being subjected was meaningless and destructive to me as a person.

As a result of my experiences in the education workshops directed by Dr. Kelley at Wayne State and the contact which I had with him personally as well as with several of his "students", I came to a very different conclusion about education. I came to understand that each individual can be and is important.

My association with Dr. Kelley continued through my undergraduate days and through my doctoral work at Wayne State. Upon his retirement from Wayne State University in 1965, Dr. Kelley came to Eastern Michigan

University where I was teaching, and spent two years as Professor Emeritus. During this time I saw him frequently and spent many hours with him discussing his work and his relationship with John Dewey.

To those who knew him well, Dr. Kelley's relationship with Dewey is taken for granted but to many people it is relatively unknown. With this fact in mind, I asked Earl if he would meet with me and discuss at some length their relationship in order that I might try to capture its essential meaning for others. He agreed to do so and what evolved from those discussions was the description of the school which follows.

Upon its completion Earl read the material and approved its accuracy. His only reservation was that he did not consider himself to be in the same class as John Dewey, and he felt I had tried to place him there. He said to me that Dewey was a great philosopher and a great scholar while he perceived himself to be neither. For those of us who knew him, he was both; but even more, he was a great

humanitarian whose life and work has brightened many classrooms across the face of the globe.

The philosophical character of American education is idealistic, in that the education "establishment" believes that the purpose of education is to:

1) prepare the student for later life;
2) make the student efficient in terms of existing institutions; and
3) mold the student's personality to established societal norms.

The resulting school program is organized around so called "basic" studies such as reading, writing, and arithmetic taught in sequential grade levels. It is assumed that the basic skills are common to all students and that they must be taught by a teacher if they are to be mastered. The methods of instruction are authoritarian, subject matter, content oriented, and aimed at arbitrarily established group norms. Within such a framework the individual becomes secondary to the group. This is clearly antithetical to democratic values.

For decades there have been attempts to make our schools more democratic. They have mostly failed. The failure has many causes, but two seem most responsible.

1) The authoritarian model has seemed until recently to work fairly well; and
2) Teachers who have been successful in authoritarian schools as students do not have the desire or understanding to change them.

Many have made significant contributions to democratizing American education. The work of Adler, Bode, Childs, Counts, Kilpatrick and Rugg have contributed greatly. John Dewey and Earl C. Kelley however stand alone in that their work, viewed together, provides us with both the philosophical base and the methodology to achieve true schools for democracy.

The Contribution of John Dewey

Professor Dewey was not primarily an educator. With the exception of an interlude at the University of Chicago where he served as the director of the school of education

from 1902 to 1904, his career was that of a philosopher. He was one of the most eminent Americans of his era; recognized and honored at home and abroad. His work is concerned with a variety of fields ranging from psychology to political science.

John Dewey's contribution to education is essentially twofold. He synthesized the liberal ideas of philosophers such as Rousseau, Herbert, and Frobel and added the pragmatic dimension. To Dewey, pragmatism implied that education:

1) represents growth in the individual's capacity to deal with situations;
2) is a continuous process and cannot be terminated by the completion of course requirements, promotion, or graduation; and
3) demands self-direction as opposed to authoritarian imposition.

These principles led to the establishment of the "activity" school which uses the interests of students and their desire to learn as the focal point of the curriculum. In

such a school, the curriculum is "child-centered", and education is concerned with the affairs of everyday life. This involvement of the child in setting goals and making decisions is essential experience for democratic living.

Perhaps Dewey's greatest impact on education came through his classic, Democracy and Education. This work became the "bible" of the Progressive Education Association and the liberal movement. The Association, established in 1918 and disbanded in 1957, had a colorful and stormy history. Its attempts to bring democracy to American education are almost legend. For a more detailed history of the Progressive Education Association see: (Cremin, 1961.).

Attempts to democratize education have often become extreme. Many of these extremes have been blamed on Dewey and he has been severely criticized by proponents of a more traditional school. In his book, Experiences and Education (Dewey, 1938), Dewey rebutted some of the extremes associated with the progressive movement. Although this book illustrates the kind of extremism Dewey

rejected, for the purpose of this examination it is more important to understand what he tried to achieve.

To do this we turn to Dewey's analysis of subject matter. Dewey says that subject matter is what one needs to know in order to do what one is interested in doing. In order that a purposeful situation may develop effectively, ideas and a knowledge of relevant facts are necessary. These facts may be observed, recalled, read about, or acquired in any way. Such ideas and facts "functioning in the development of a situation" having a purpose are subject matter. The curriculum - reading, writing, arithmetic, nature study, drawing, signing, languages, etc., - is only "potential subject matter". The curriculum becomes subject matter to the learner when, if, and as it is used in purposeful activities. It is the "situation", not the teacher, school or recitation schedule that makes subject matter of vital concern to the learner (Dewey, 1916.).

He was just as concerned with the role of the teacher. According to Dewey:

"It is then the business of the educator to see in what direction an experience is heading. There is no point in his being more mature if, instead of using his greater insight to help organize the conditions of the experience of the immature, he throws away his insight... The mature person, to put it in moral terms, has no right to withhold from the young on given occasions whatever capacity for sympathetic understanding his own experience has given him.

No sooner, however, are such things said than there is a tendency to react to the other extreme and take what has been said as a plea for some sort of disguised imposition from outside." (Dewey, 1916.)

One of the most significant trends in Dewey's thought is his recognition of the importance of individual perception. In My Pedagogic Creed, he states:

"To attempt to develop the reasoning powers, the powers of judgment, without reference to the selection and arrangement of means in action is the fundamental fallacy in our present methods of dealing with the matter. As a result we present the child with arbitrary symbols. Symbols are a necessity in mental development, but they have their place as tools, for economizing effort; presented by themselves they are a mass of meaningless and arbitrary ideas imposed from without.

The image is the great instrument of instruction. What a child gets out of any subject presented to him is simply the images which he himself forms with regard to it." (Dewey, 1897.)

Dewey's efforts to state a philosophy of education and to elaborate the methods used to implement this philosophy are among the most democratizing concepts in American educational thought. His followers and his contributions to democratic education are numerous. For example, the emergence of vocational education, school laboratories, home economics, and physical education are recognitions of the need for giving more attention to the interests and needs of students. In spite of this, the school of today is far short of the one advocated by Dewey. In fact, contemporary schools have moved away from rather than toward the school Dewey envisioned.

As we begin to examine Kelley's contribution, it is important to understand the relationship between these two great educators.

Dewey and Kelley

Earl Kelley's most notable contribution to a more democratic school was his study of perception. In fact, a shared interest in perception first brought Dewey and Kelley

together. Upon reading the manuscript of Kelley's Education for What is Real, William Kilpatrick suggested that Dewey see the perception demonstrations described in the book. After seeing them and reading Kelley's book, Dewey wrote in his forward to Education for What is Real:

> "I am especially grateful to Dr. Kelley for permitting me to have a part in calling attention to a work whose significance will prove virtually inexhaustible." (Kelley, 1947.)

These events marked the beginning of a close personal and professional relationship between Dewey and Kelley. Dewey's career was nearly finished before Kelley's began. Dewey reportedly told Kelley, "My work is not finished, it is your job to complete it." Dewey's belief that Kelley's work represented a significant contribution to the democratization of education is well documented. Speaking of Education and the Nature of Man, Dewey said:

> "I have had only once in many recent years as much satisfying intellectual agreement in reading the writings of others as I have had in reading this manuscript. (Kelley and Rasey, 1952.)

and further on The Workshop Way of Learning, he stated:

> "After familiarizing myself with the activities initiated and conducted by the workshop as herein described, I have concluded that it supplies the missing and much needed factor in the development of the theory of progressive education. For it applies to the training of teachers the principles that have been set forth as applicable to and in the education of those under instruction." (Kelley, 1951.)

It is clear that Dewey was hopeful that the work of Kelley would compliment and extend his own. With this thought in mind, we turn to an examination of Kelley's contributions.

The Contributions of Earl Kelley

Because Kelley's most notable contribution to liberal thought was his work in perception, let us begin by allowing him to explain what perception means:

> "The psychological part of the functioning unit which we call a human being is built through the operation of the phenomenon called perception. Perception is what comes into consciousness when stimuli - light, sound, touch, taste, and odors - impinge upon the body from the outside... So life, as we think of it, depends upon our ability to perceive.
>
> ... We do not see everything in our surroundings... We see what we select out of our environment, and we select on the basis of two factors. First, we see what we have experience to see. But experience is not enough to account for the selection, because in any scene there

are many things with which we have had experience, but which we do not see. The second determining factor is that we see what we have purpose to see.

... Since no two people can have the same experiences, it follows that each person is unique from all others in this regard." (Kelley, 1957.)

The acceptance of the uniqueness of every individual is basic to Kelley's educational proposals. If every individual is different from every other individual, and these differences are inherent in the nature of each person's unique perceptions, schools should recognize and account for this uniqueness in the programs they offer. It is not difficult to demonstrate that such has not been the case. Much of Kelley's work is spiced with humorous but pointed examples of the folly of traditional school practices. He castigates, for example, the fixed curriculum which exposes all children to the same lessons at the same time. Speaking of this before the General Education Committee Conference on October 30, 1964, at Walden Woods, Michigan, he said:

"We are not looking to the learner before we decide what we are going to do about him... We wouldn't think much of an M.D., for example, who gives the same medicine to everybody who comes to him. He's

supposed to look at you and see what you're like, and see what ails you before he decides what he's going to do about it.

It is as though one were going to fix a broken chair, and went first to his tool box without looking at the chair. He might see a saw; everybody knows saws are good. Probably every chair in the world needs a little sawing." (Kelley, 1964.)

Beyond examining individuals and deciding what kind of educational experiences are most in keeping with their nature, Kelley felt we ought to examine the society in which they live and provide educational experiences in keeping with the principles of democracy.

"It ought not to be necessary to make a case for democracy in the classroom. Americans have taken their stand before the world in the cause of democracy. We refer to our part of the world as the 'free' world. We know that democratic citizenship has to be learned. We see much evidence that it is not being learned by our children and youth.

... Over a hundred years ago, we decided that no nation could survive half slave and half free. We liberated an ethnic group from physical if not from economic bondage. It is doubtful that we can maintain our position as the champion of freedom and democracy unless we can free the minds of our young." (Kelley, 1961.)

Speaking about the necessity for democracy to be extended into the classroom, Kelley further states:

> "There are those who will reject democracy in the classroom on the grounds that the young do not know what they want. It is, of course, true that they cannot see remote goals and teachers must help them. But they can make a start, and a feeling of acceptance and involvement is all that is needed to start with.
>
> ....The struggle between those who would enslave and those who would be free has been continuous throughout the history of man. Parents and teachers who would resist tyranny of any sort when applied to themselves seem to think it is good for the young." (Kelley, 1961.)

The Democratic School

The ideas of Dewey and Kelley seem logical and demonstrable. The basic tenants of their democratic philosophy are more or less accepted by most educators. Few, however, have been able to put the philosophy into actual practice. Indeed, many educators charge that Dewey and Kelley offer more insight into what is wrong with current practice than what should be done. With this criticism in mind what follows are some of the basic aspects of the

democratic school advocated by Dewey and Kelley and some of the practical implications of their suggestions.

The school as envisioned by Dewey and Kelley should:

1) Be consistent with the basic tenants of democracy;
2) Enhance the self-concept of the learner;
3) Actively involve the learner;
4) Place the concrete before the abstract;
5) Be flexible; and
6) Place the teacher in a helping relationship.

If we really believe that democracy is the best social order, our schools must reflect this belief. It seemed paradoxical to both Dewey and Kelley that we attempt to teach children to inherit and operate a great democracy with an educational system which is authoritarian in its design and operation. According to Kelley the democratic school recognizes that every person has worth and value and that their unique purposes can be the most profitable guides for their energies.

The young are in the process of becoming adults. It is, therefore, necessary to help them become adults not by imposing adult values and purposes on them but rather by assisting them to develop their own unique purposes.

Imposing adult values and purposes on the young impedes learning. According to Kelley:

> "If we allow children to start with their own world and their present goals, the problem of motivation will take care of itself." (Kelley, 1964.)

Both Dewey and Kelley cautioned against an excessive concern with abstraction and the rote learning of things which are not meaningful to the child. The individual must not suffer the damage which occurs when he is assigned tasks he cannot perform and is subjected to failure when he does not comply. The "subject matter" of the school should grow out of the needs of the learner and not be imposed by the adults in charge. This implies the elimination of grades, promotion, and other such devices. The school should be a place of activity for the learner where they would be involved in the planning, execution, and evaluation of activities.

No program should be imposed on the school from without. The program of the school should result from the planning of those it serves, including the students. The role of teachers is to guide children, not "tell" them.

Both Dewey and Kelley recognized that they were not witnessing the changes in schools which they sought to achieve. It was with some resignation that Kelley observed:

> "It has been a long time since Abraham Lincoln said, 'As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master.' This concept has made considerable progress in some areas of our society. The next great bastion for this idea to breach is the classroom, all the way from the kindergarten through the graduate school. This has been, and probably will continue to be, the toughest barrier of all." (Kelley, 1961.)

Kelley wrote these words in 1961. It is not difficult to demonstrate that we are losing rather than gaining ground in this struggle. It has long been a characteristic of intelligent action to change behavior if you do not get the results you desire. Since there is such widespread agreement that we are not getting the citizens we need from our current practices, isn't it time we made some fundamental changes in what we are doing?

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NOTES